OtherHand

I get sucked in

It never seems crazy at the beginning

I first came across the story of the missing Germans sometime in the Summer of 2008. While romping around the Innerwebz, between piano playing cats and oceans of porn, I saw references to the tale on a Death Valley forum. It sounded interesting, so I Googled a bit more and came across a report the CLMRG had done for their newsletter, "The Talus Pile". The newsletter item laid out the basics of the case, but not much more. I was intrigued, but was quickly diverted by more piano playing cats. Still, it remained in the back of my mind and was one of the two cases that got me seriously interested in the search and rescue field (the other was Steve Fossett).

After joining the Riverside Mountain Rescue Unit (RMRU) in February of 2009, I actively began seeking out whatever training I could find. One opportunity I came across was a 2-1/2 day course on mantracking in Ridgecrest at the end of September, 2009. I know "mantracking" sounds a bit ominous, but it just involves learning to follow the tracks of people rather than animals. That skill comes in handy in SAR operations.

The class was being hosted by the CLMRG and I knew a lot of their members would be in attendance. This was a great opportunity to ask more about the German's case. I had now been in SAR long enough to know that there are often details to incidents that don't make it into general circulation, and many times there is much more to the story. The missing Germans struck me as a case that simply had to have more to it.

After making an inquiry or two, I was told, "Oh, you need to talk to Debbie Breitenstein. She's obsessed with it. She was on the original search and has all the background". In my

world, obsessed is good, so this looked promising. Due to class activities I wasn't able to connect with Debbie until almost the end of the class, which was at a barbeque held at her home. Ever suave with opening lines, I think I started with something to the effect of "So, tell me about the missing Death Valley Germans...."

Debbie at first appeared a little reluctant to get into the subject, as if she didn't want to dump an avalanche of information on me. But my obnoxious persistence and the thought that someone else actually was interested in the topic finally got her going.

Beyond getting a much more detailed rundown of the incident, I found out two major points of information. The first was that Debbie had much of the original documentation of the search in her possession. The second was that unlike many cases, there really wasn't more to it than met the eye. The basic information of the case I was already aware of was all there really was. This only added to the mystery. Debbie also mentioned the names of two private individuals who had performed some searching and written reports of their efforts, Emmett Harder and Dick Hasselman. She said she thought their reports might still be available online.

Returning home, I swung into data collection mode. Ignoring my usual diversions of lolcats, I scoured the Internet for even the slightest mention of the Germans, as well as the Harder and Hasselman reports. I was able to find a few bits, but the two reports I was after eluded me.

Seeing Dick Hasselman being referred to as a retired professor from Virgina Tech, I was able to track down his university email and send him a query. After a bit of back and forth he sent me a hard copy of his latest version. In terms of factual events it displayed the accuracy typically seen in academic work, which was refreshing. And he had also spent considerable time interviewing the relatives of the Germans back in Germany, attempting to develop a profile of the group. This, however, left me a bit uneasy. It's well known in the SAR field that relatives are notoriously poor in describing even such simple things as what a subject was wearing when last seen. To ask them to describe a subject's state of mind or intent, years after an event, is just asking to be led down wrong paths. So while I found much of his work spot on, my experience caused me to weigh the data points differently and ultimately found many of his conclusions improbable.

Hasselman did bring up a couple of possible new clues I had not been aware of. First, there was a story of an individual on an ATV finding a couple of "German canteens" in an area described as being the midpoint of a straight line drawn been Sugarloaf and Needle Peak. This would have been about 3-1/2 miles southeasterly of the van's location. As riding an ATV offroad in a national park was not something authorities smiled upon, getting details of this alleged event was difficult.

The second possible clue mentioned by Hasselman was that in the three month period between when the Germans apparently became stuck and when the van was discovered, a ranger on patrol about 18 miles to the south found an abandoned sleeping bag in the middle of a remote dirt road. As there was a sleeping bag from the van unaccounted for, could this possibly be connected? Unfortunately, not yet aware of the Germans who were at that time missing in Anvil Canyon, DVNP disposed of the sleeping bag as trash, so it could never be examined as evidence.

I found this second clue very intriguing, due to a personal connection. Oddly, my wife Jeri and I had done a hiking trip in the very area the sleeping bag was found in March of 1996, only four months before the Germans became trapped. The road where the bag was found is rugged and extremely remote, ending at a microwave relay tower at time owned by AT&T. I knew the road and I knew the tower and thought it could have been a landmark a lost person might move toward. I also knew there was nothing much else to be seen in the area, as it's against the northerly edges of the China Lake Naval Weapons Center boundary. And covering a straight line distance of 18 miles in the heat of July seemed highly unlikely.

Tracking down Emmett Harder's report eventually lead me to a visit to his home in Devore, California on October 21st. We spoke for almost four hours about the case, the people involved and the general area of Death Valley. He also provided me with a copy of his report, "Cauldron of Hell Fire", as well as a copy of the DV Investigator's report by Eric Inman, and several other useful documents.

I asked him about the "German canteen(s)" that Hasselman said were supposedly found to the south, between Sugarloaf and Needle Peaks. Harder had some detail on this, as well as knowing and talking to the motorcyclist was who supposedly found them. But he didn't put too much weight on it, as the individual was unable to actually produce the canteen(s) and the responses were less than satisfactory in Harder's opinion. Further, Harder later found

out there was a food/water cache placed in the same general area for a group of long distance hiker/survivalists traveling from Battle Mountain, Nevada to the Salton Sea. The party ended up missing their cache, and so it would have remained in place, and any canteens could be related to that.

During all this I continued to pester Debbie for more information, and despite her work commitments she obliged, and more data kept flowing my way. Incident logs, clue lists, all sorts of wonderful stuff. In reviewing it I was impressed with the quality and thoroughness of the previous searching done by the various SAR teams. It became obvious to me that there were certain areas that, looking back in hindsight, could probably be excluded as they had been rigorously searched. Amazingly, this could be said of all of Anvil Canyon, most of Butte Valley, as well as Warm Spring Canyon. In essence, every place the Germans "should" have gone had been thoroughly searched with no trace found. This was certainly a strange case.

Yet four people can't simply vanish into thin, if somewhat hot, air! This is probably the reason so many wild ideas as to their fate appeared over the years. The vacuum of solid information was slowly filled with wild speculation. Perhaps now might be a good time to list some of the ideas out there and editorialize a bit.

Probably the most popular explanation as to what became of the Germans is that they staged the incident to "disappear" and start new lives. This was given some momentum by Egbert's ex-wife saying there were custody issues with their son. Also, co-workers of Egbert's stated he talked about moving to Costa Rica (which was rumored to have provided some sort of legal shelter if he brought his son along).

As I said, this was a popular scenario. Even some SAR members and DVNP staff thought it possible. But really, if you wanted to stage a disappearance, why do it in a dangerous and remote environment like Death Valley in Summer? It could have been just as effective and much simpler to have done such a thing while in Las Vegas. Further, Cornelia had a thriving business back in Germany which required her attention upon her return. She was in no position to "vanish".

Another idea floating around was that Egbert was intent on penetrating the China lake NWC facility in the hopes of seeing exotic technology. There were a lot of vague, long after

the fact reports from relatives that he had heard of a very secret facility near Death Valley and was obsessed with finding out more. Further, he supposedly had some involvement in "hybrid propulsion" (whatever that means) and variants of this scenario either had the group forcibly conscripted into a black US government program, or more sinisterly, they saw something they weren't supposed to see and were "eliminated" by US government black world operatives.

I suppose my background gives me the advantage of easily seeing the level of nonsense in this theory. I was quite involved in the amazing social fad in the mid-1990s that swirled around the facility at Groom Lake, better known as "Area 51". I knew all the major players and spent considerable time unraveling many of its mysteries. Given that era in time, I am certain any reference to a secret facility near Death Valley, especially by a European, was a reference to Area 51 and not China Lake. No offense to China Lake, as I'm sure they have some rather interesting and overlooked things of their own, but there was nothing there to pull in tourists from Germany, and certainly nothing to be inadvertently observed that would make someone "disappear".

Further, my background also includes graduate work and research in what could best be labeled "exotic propulsion" (including a few papers). So when someone starts tossing around phrases like hybrid propulsion, I'm qualified to weigh in. First, the phrase itself means nothing, but it suggests something exotic and otherworldly (which was probably the intent). But a Toyota Prius uses hybrid propulsion. Very cool, but nothing amazing. Further, investigating some of the names that Egbert was alleged to have worked with showed them to be designers of exotically styled automotive vehicles. Finally, if someone wanted to see into the China Lake facility and attempt to observe what's going on, there are far better and easier locations to do so. So the idea that the Germans were in that area at all to penetrate or observe the China Lake facility is fantasy.

The last of the popular alternative theories as to what befell the Germans involved their crossing paths with some sort of criminal element. Some thought it could have been aging Charles Manson followers from the somewhat nearby Barker Ranch, or merely backcountry sociopaths. I have to admit, there is a possibility of this, but fortunately a very low one. The overwhelming majority of people who have made the effort to get into the backcountry are wonderful folks. This concept has the Germans crossing paths with one or more unsavory individuals, being killed, and their van dumped in Anvil Canyon to hide the

crime.

The question one must immediately ask is “why?” Egbert’s bank cards were left in the van and not taken. No activity was ever recorded on Cornelia’s cards. The van was left locked and no other vehicle tracks were seen. Why wasn’t the van taken? It would have been the most valuable thing the Germans had. And then there was the empty beer bottle found well downstream from the van’s location. The searchers did spend a lot of time looking for something that could have been a grave but failed. Finally, while bad guys might not be the swiftest people in the world, why would they be hanging around the backcountry of Death Valley in Summer?

Of course there were also the even stranger ideas like alien abduction. When people seemingly vanish into thin air, everybody jumps to blame the aliens. It appears to be the explanation of last resort, and useful in almost any situation. But without going too far out on a limb, I think we can safely eliminate the possibility in this case.

Given the lack of clues in this case, after time it became sort of a Rorschach Test for searchers. People saw what they wanted to see as their minds attempted to form a conclusion. It’s well known that the human mind desperately wants to connect cause and effect and will often craft answers when there are in fact, none.

I had now reached the point where I possessed all the information I was likely to obtain for the case. I had also spent many hours studying topo maps and Google Earth. I was beginning to seriously look at the area southerly of the van, primarily because it seemed to be the only area that hadn’t been searched and the terrain didn’t seem impossible. Problem was, there was no apparent reason for the party to head in that direction. The found beer bottle suggested they were heading eastward, toward the main valley.

It was now time to head into the field and observe what things looked like for myself and see if there was any conceivable reason the Germans might want to have headed south. I decided on the perhaps not-too-bright course of action of making this a solo trip. I thought it important I see the area with fresh eyes, undistracted by company. My plan was to hike into Anvil Canyon, and perhaps linger in the canyon until after dark, coming out via head lamp and camping in my truck at the trailhead. I thought this could be useful as the Moon’s phase and rise/set times were similar to what was in effect when the Germans were

there. I was interested to observe if there were any distant sky glows visible that could have enticed them into a specific direction, especially to the south.

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